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Yoga for prison inmates is no longer a stretch

Volunteers bring workshops to men's, women's facilities

By Michelle Manchir, Chicago Tribune reporter
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Ten yoga mats, foam support blocks and a qualified instructor awaited the women who filed quietly into the recreation room, slipped off their shoes and stood in place on the mats, prepared for the stretching routine to begin.

The only remarkable element among the trappings of this beginners' yoga class was its location: Inside the barbed wire fence of the Cook County Jail. The participants were inmates. Instead of yoga pants, they wore Department of Corrections-issued pink and gray uniforms.

Yoga and meditation sessions have been a mainstay in the women's jail for six years, since a group of volunteers from a local nonprofit that encourages yoga as an element of rehabilitation started showing up, mats in tow, and leading classes for all female inmates, said Alisa Kannett, an administrator with the nonprofit Yoga for Recovery.

For years correctional facilities across Illinois and the country have been implementing yoga workshops and programs, sometimes at the urging of inmates, and the trend is growing, said Gabriella Savelli, director of Prison S.M.A.R.T. The group has helped implement yoga programs at 36 correctional facilities in 21 states, including at a men's boot camp in Cook County and Stateville Correctional Center in Crest Hill.

Prisoners participating in yoga may see psychological benefits, such as reduced stress and improved mood, according to a study published this summer by scholars at Oxford University.

Researchers found that prisoners who embarked on a 10-week yoga course also showed greater accuracy in a computer test of impulsivity and attention. But it doesn't require an academic study to know that, for some inmates, practicing yoga just feels good.

As the 10 women in one of the jail's residential programs stretched their arms and breathed deeply at a recent session, their comments during the class made that clear.

"Lovely. That was cool," said Kristy Montgomery, 29, after completing a tree pose.

Like many of the women in Montgomery's division, she has a history of substance abuse and prostitution, and the weekly class is "healing," she said. "Every time, my body feels lighter. My mind feels lighter and feels freer."

Despite the benefits, the exercise and meditation can be a hard sell to some of the incarcerated men and women with traumatic backgrounds who have never encountered it, Savelli said.

Marshawn Feltus said he is a perfect example of that state of mind. When he entered Illinois River Correctional Center in Canton in central Illinois years ago, he knew nothing about yoga. And frankly, he said, he didn't much care about knowing it, either.

"The few poses that I had seen, I kinda just glanced it over and said, 'Oh, that's white people exercise,'" Feltus said.

But his shoulders hurt from weightlifting, he said, and after a buddy persuaded him to attend a session with him, he instantly became a fan.

"If yoga was a lady, I would've definitely said 'I do,'" Feltus said of his first experience on a yoga mat.

Now living on the West Side and out of prison on parole, Feltus runs his own yoga practice, which opened in late June in the Austin neighborhood. He attributes a big part of his recovery to the practice, he said.

Still, for some inmates, coming to yoga just means an hour or 90 minutes out of their cells, said Rick Fahnestock. He oversees the yoga program at Illinois River Correctional Center, a medium-security prison with about 2,000 male inmates.

Fahnestock said he can expect at least 20 inmates to attend the yoga sessions offered five days a week along with weightlifting and pickup basketball games in the prison. Sometimes, as many as 40 show up, he said.

At least three other Illinois Department of Corrections prisons also offer yoga or mediation programs to inmates, said Tom Shaer, spokesman for the department. At Stateville, yoga is on hiatus due to lack of space but the program will resume September 9th, Shaer said.

Because of ubiquitous tight budgets, neither the state nor the city spends any money to run yoga programs at correctional facilities, officials said. For most, offering a yoga class for inmates depends primarily on the availability of volunteers, like Kannett, who said she oversees about 30 volunteers who lead yoga for women in the Cook County Jail.

They take different approaches than traditional yoga, Kannett said. Kannett urges instructors at the jail to withhold touching the inmates to adjust their positions in any way. Many inmates, such as those with a history of abuse, could be sensitive to or offended by the touching, she said.

"People who've been through trauma don't like to feel like someone's behind them," said Marcelyn Cole, an instructor for more than five years who's volunteered for two years with Yoga for Recovery.

At a recent session at the jail, Cole told participants they didn't need to close their eyes if it made them uncomfortable to do so during savasana, often the final pose in a yoga practice during which participants lie completely relaxed on their backs.

Yoga in correctional centers might have more of a focus on rehabilitation than spiritual awakening, said Elizabeth Feldman, a doctor who is a medical coordinator for the Cook County sheriff's office and oversees medical care for a men's boot camp at the jail.

"There's no talking about how to improve people's karma; there's talking about stress management," Feldman said.

Feldman said the men in the boot camp enjoy yoga as a break from the military-style approach of other exercise. For some, it helps soothe muscles cramped by vigorous exercise or from sleeping nightly on a metal slab covered only with a thin mattress.

But it's not for all the inmates. Any who have certain disabilities or behavior disorders that make it difficult for them to sit still or follow directions, or who've committed extremely violent crimes, are generally not invited to yoga sessions, Feldman said.

Yoga is just one element being implemented to help rehabilitate incarcerated people, Feldman said.

"It's not the miracle cure of everything that ails society," Feldman said. "It's one tool that might be helpful."